BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Withburga

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: March 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Withburga

Anglo-Saxon nun, foundress of the monastery of Dereham (Norfolk), whose relics were venerated at Ely.

Feast day	March 17
Born	7th century, East Anglia (England), according to tradition
Died	March 17, 743 (traditional chronology), Dereham (Norfolk, England)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	8th century

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Withburga

Saint Withburga, in Old English Wihtburh, was an Anglo-Saxon nun who founded a monastery at Dereham, in Norfolk, England. Tradition makes her the youngest daughter of King Anna of East Anglia and the sister of Saint Etheldreda of Ely, but historians consider this kinship uncertain. According to the traditional chronology she died in 743. Her feast day is March 17.

Who was Saint Withburga?

Withburga is a figure of Anglo-Saxon England whose memory was kept mainly at Dereham and at Ely. The sources that speak of her are late: a group of texts known as the "Kentish royal legend", the *Liber Eliensis*, a chronicle of the abbey of Ely written in the 12th century, and a brief mention in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Bede the Venerable, who speaks at length of the daughters of King Anna who became nuns, does not mention her. We must therefore distinguish what is certain, an ancient cult at Dereham and then at Ely, from what remains uncertain, her family and her dates.

Key dates in the life of Withburga

- **7th century**: Born; according to tradition, she is the youngest daughter of King Anna of East Anglia.
- **653 or 654**: According to the *Liber Eliensis*, after King Anna is killed in battle, she consecrates herself to God and founds a monastery at Dereham.
- **March 17, 743**: Dies at Dereham, according to the chronology drawn from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.
- **798**: Her body is exhumed and found intact, fifty-five years after her death, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

- **974**: The monks of Ely take her relics from the church of Dereham and carry them to their monastery.
- **1106**: Her relics are placed in a new shrine in the church of Ely, beside those of Saint Etheldreda and Saint Sexburga.
- **16th century**: The shrine of Ely disappears at the Reformation.

The foundress of Dereham

According to the *Liber Eliensis*, Withburga consecrated herself to God after her father died in battle, in 653 or 654, and founded a monastery at Dereham, in Norfolk. Almost nothing is known of the life of this community. A popular legend, much loved at Dereham, tells that while the monastery was being built, food ran short for the workmen; Withburga prayed to the Virgin Mary, and two does came every day to be milked to feed the community. This is why she is sometimes shown with deer.

A debated chronology

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that in 798 the body of Withburga was exhumed and found without any trace of decay, fifty-five years after her death. Her death would therefore fall in 743. Yet it seems unlikely that a daughter of King Anna, who died in 653 or 654, lived until then. Modern historians therefore consider her ancestry uncertain. The monks of Ely, who owned her relics, may have linked her to the family of Etheldreda and Sexburga, the first abbesses of their house, to increase the prestige of their shrine.

Disputed relics

In 974, the monks of Ely took the relics of Withburga by night from the church of Dereham and carried them to their monastery. Such "furtive translations" were not rare in the Middle Ages: owning the body of a saint drew pilgrims and the protection of heaven. The Dereham tradition adds that

a spring welled up at the site of the empty tomb, in the churchyard. In 1106, at Ely, Withburga's relics were placed in a new shrine together with those of Etheldreda and Sexburga; they remained there until the Reformation.

Devotion and art

Saint Withburga is celebrated on March 17, the day of her death. Some calendars also celebrated the translation of her relics on July 8. The church of Saint Nicholas at Dereham keeps her memory: her portrait is painted on the rood screen, and the site of her tomb is shown in the churchyard. She is shown as an abbess, with a crozier, a model of a church or the does of the legend.

What can we learn from Saint Withburga?

History has kept few certain facts about Withburga, and that itself is a lesson: holiness is not measured by documents, but by the faithfulness of a life given and by the trust of a people who kept praying to her. The legend of the does speaks of her trust in Providence when everything was lacking. You can pray to her for those who lack what they need, for those who are beginning a work, and for mothers who feed their families.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Withburga and the novena to Saint Withburga.

Where to pray to Saint Withburga

- **Dereham** (Norfolk, England): the church of Saint Nicholas, her portrait on the rood screen and the site of her tomb.
- **Ely** (Cambridgeshire): the cathedral, where her relics were venerated until the Reformation.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Withburga for Those in Need

Saint Withburga, or Wihtburh, was an Anglo-Saxon nun who founded a monastery at Dereham, in Norfolk. A legend tells that when food ran short, she entrusted herself to the Virgin Mary and that Providence provided for the needs of her community. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to her those who lack what they need and those who are beginning a work.

Prayer to Saint Withburga

Saint Withburga,
you left the world to build at Dereham
a house of prayer.
When bread was lacking,
you turned with trust to the Virgin Mary.
Teach me to hope in God in difficult days.

Watch over families who lack what they need,
over mothers who worry about feeding their children,
over those who begin a work with few means.
Obtain for them the help they need
and peace of heart.

You whose memory the Church has kept
despite the silence of the centuries,
help me to live faithfully, without seeking to be seen,
under the gaze of the Father.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Withburga

- On her feast day, March 17.
- When your household lacks what it needs.
- When beginning a work, a building or a project.
- For mothers and all who feed others.
- For religious communities that live in poverty.

A short invocation

> *Saint Withburga, trusting in Providence,*
> *teach us to expect everything from God,*
> *and pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Withburga from March 9 to 17, and read the life of Saint Withburga.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Withburga

This novena is an original composition inspired by the life and tradition of Saint Withburga, or Wihtburh, an Anglo-Saxon nun and foundress of the monastery of Dereham. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, March 17, begin on March 9. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Withburga, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely. The sources on her life are late and mix history and legend; the meditations draw on them freely.

Day 1: A little-known life

We know little about Withburga. But the Church has kept her memory, because her life bore fruit. God sees what is hidden.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to live under your gaze, without seeking the approval of others.

Act of the day: Do a good deed in secret.

Day 2: After mourning

According to the *Liber Eliensis*, Withburga consecrated herself to God after her father died in battle. Grief became for her a path to God.

Prayer: Lord, comfort those who mourn, and make their sorrow a path toward you.

Act of the day: Pray for someone who has lost a loved one, or reach out to them.

Day 3: Founding a house of prayer

At Dereham, Withburga founded a monastery. She began with little, but she began.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to begin the good you expect of me, even with few means.

Act of the day: Begin today something good that you have been putting off.

Day 4: When bread runs short

The legend says that food ran short for the workmen. Withburga did not give in to anxiety: she prayed.

Prayer: Lord, when I lack something, teach me to turn first to you.

Act of the day: Give food to a food bank or to someone in need.

Day 5: Trust in Mary

According to the legend, Withburga entrusted her distress to the Virgin Mary. The Mother of God does not abandon those who call on her.

Prayer: Virgin Mary, I entrust to you my needs and those of my family. Present them to your Son.

Act of the day: Pray a decade of the Rosary.

Day 6: The does of Dereham

Two does, the legend says, came every day to give their milk. Providence often passes along unexpected paths.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to the signs of your Providence in my daily life.

Act of the day: In the evening, write down three graces received during the day.

Day 7: A body respected

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that her body was found intact years after her death. Our bodies are called to resurrection.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to respect my body and the bodies of others, temples of your Spirit.

Act of the day: Care for someone who is sick or elderly.

Day 8: Disputed relics

The monks of Ely carried her relics far from Dereham. The saints belong to the whole Church, beyond our rivalries.

Prayer: Lord, heal the rivalries between Christians, and make us work together for your Kingdom.

Act of the day: Take a step toward reconciliation with someone.

Day 9: A spring in the churchyard

Tradition says that a spring welled up at the site of her tomb. From a life given springs new life.

Prayer: Lord, make the spring of your grace well up in me. Through the intercession of Saint Withburga, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass if possible, and pray for the departed.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Withburga,*
> *foundress of Dereham, trusting in Providence,*
> *you expected everything from God.*
> *Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Watch over those who lack what they need*
> *and keep us in hope.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Withburga at any time, and read the life of Saint Withburga.

PILGRIMAGE

Saint Nicholas Church, Dereham

The church of Saint Nicholas at Dereham (or East Dereham) stands at the heart of this small town in Norfolk, England, about twenty-five kilometers west of Norwich. It was at Dereham that, according to tradition, Saint Withburga founded a monastery in the 7th century and was first buried. The parish church keeps her memory today, and the site of her tomb is shown in the churchyard.

A saint and her town

According to the *Liber Eliensis*, Withburga settled at Dereham after the death of King Anna of East Anglia, whom tradition presents as her father. She founded a religious community there and died there, according to the traditional chronology, in 743. Her body, venerated on the spot, was taken in 974 by the monks of Ely, who carried it to their monastery. The Dereham tradition says that at the site of the empty tomb a spring welled up, known since as Saint Withburga's well.

The town has remained very attached to its foundress. The legend of the two does which, according to tradition, fed Withburga's community with their milk is part of Dereham's identity.

What you can see

In the church of Saint Nicholas, an old panel of the rood screen shows Saint Withburga. Outside, in the churchyard, is the site of her tomb, with the well that bears her name. These simple places allow you to join the memory of a saint whom the people of Dereham honored for centuries, even after her relics had gone.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Withburga. Near the well, entrust to her those who lack what they need, families and those who are beginning a work. In the church, you can say the prayer to Saint Withburga and give thanks for God's Providence. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Withburga

- **Ely** (Cambridgeshire): the cathedral, where her relics rested near those of Saint Etheldreda and Saint Sexburga, from 1106 until the Reformation.

Practical information

Dereham lies in Norfolk, west of Norwich. The church of Saint Nicholas is today an Anglican church; it is a place of prayer, where modest dress and silence are expected. Opening hours may vary: check with the parish before you come. To attend a Catholic Mass, ask at the nearest Catholic parish.

Credits and sources

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